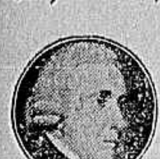
The Story of the DECLARATION of INDEPENDENCE

By Ida M. Tarbell


Benjamin Rush


Joseph Hewes


Tho M'Kean


Roger Sherman


Geo Ross


George Wythe


Samuel Chase


Saml Huntington


Elbridge Gerry


Geo Taylor


John Penn


Wm Paca


Richd Stockton

[The portraits of the signers of the Declaration of Independence in this article are believed to be the most complete ever published. The best portrait of each signer has been selected. Portraits of all the signers save two were made. The exceptions are John Morton and Caesar Rodney. Of the former there is no authentic portrait, and the latter, owing to a scar on his face, never allowed his portrait painted. The autographs are facsimiles of those on the engrossed copy of the Declaration of Independence now in the library of the state department, Washington.]

THE Continental congress was very busy in the spring of 1776. Its daily sessions were taken up with the reading of letters from the generals of its army, accepting new companies of militia, directing battalions and gunpowder toward this or that province, disarming people who persisted in refusing to fight Great Britain, ordering cannon cast, buying saltpeter, imprisoning the suspected, voting money for rations and forage, establishing hospitals, forbidding trade with England—in short, with the carrying on of a vigorous war against a country to which it still officially acknowledged allegiance.

This condition of affairs had existed for more than a year. Occasionally, it is true, congress had suspended hostilities long enough to protest that the colonists were not rebels, only "petitioners in arms" bent on setting right their wrongs, but the futility of its petitions and prayers had gradually worn out the patience and hope of even the most loyal of the members. When congress came together in the spring of 1776 it was pretty certain that nobody would advocate another petition. It was more likely that entire separation from the mother country was imminent. If there were many who dreaded such a step, there were others who were doing their utmost to hasten it. So strong were these latter that in May they even forced through congress a resolution calling upon the colonies to form independent governments. The temper which had carried this revolutionary measure had not subsided when the news reached Philadelphia that the colonial legislature of Virginia had instructed its delegates to congress to bring in a resolution declaring the united colonies free and independent.

It was on June 7 that Richard Henry Lee, the spokesman of the Virginia delegation, arose in congress. He had been ordered, he said, by the unanimous vote of the members of the council of Virginia to present the following resolution:

"That these united colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown; that all political connection between them and Great Britain is and ought to be totally dissolved."

Two other resolutions followed, contingent upon the first, but it is not necessary to consider them here.

Lee had not taken his seat before there was a "second" to his motion. It came from John Adams of Massachusetts. A more welcome task could not have fallen to a man than this to John Adams. A patriot by choice from the day in 1761 when he first heard James Otis' famous speech against the writs of assistance, he had for years sacrificed business, family, health, peace of mind, to the American cause. He was one of the few who from the first believed that separation was the only outcome of the contention with Great Britain. From the time he entered the First congress of the colonies, in 1774, he had boldly and incessantly advocated independence.

To see that congress felt it was playing with fire in considering Mr. Lee's resolution one has only to examine the journal of its proceedings for June 7, 1776. So hazardous was the matter regarded for those taking the initiative that in recording the resolutions neither their substance nor Mr. Lee's and Mr. Adams' names are mentioned. "Certain resolutions," says the journal, "being moved and seconded, resolved that the consideration of them be deferred until tomorrow morning and that the members be enjoined to attend promptly at 10 o'clock in order to take the same into consideration." They debated all the next day, Saturday, and again all day Monday on the question. Who spoke and what was said are not certainly known, as the journal has no record. John Adams and his cousin Sam, Roger Sherman, Oliver Wolcott, R. H. Lee, George Wythe—these were undoubtedly the great speakers for separation.

The chief opponent, Mr. Adams' leading antagonist, was John Dickinson of Pennsylvania. Dickinson at this time was a man forty-four years of age, three years older than Adams, a gentleman who had had as good an education as the colonies afforded and who had followed it by a term in the Temple, London.

From the beginning of the trouble with England he had opposed her on the ground that her acts were contrary to English law.

It was Dickinson, then, who, when the debate began on Lee's motion, was first on his feet. His most practical arguments were that such a declaration was premature, that the colonies should wait at least until they had perfected their military arrangements and secured if possible the aid of France, with which country they were then negotiating. The names of all who followed Dickinson we do not know, but among them were able and loyal men—John Jay, James Wilson, James Duane, Robert R. Livingstone, Edward Rutledge—but it was evident from the beginning of the debate that they were in the minority. The delegates of seven colonies—four in New England, three in the south—were either instructed to vote for independence or leaned toward it. Those of six colonies—New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware and South Carolina—were opposed to the resolution. In such a matter unanimity was of the utmost importance, and after a three days' debate it was decided to postpone a final vote until the first day of July, and in order that no time be lost a committee was appointed to prepare a declaration suitable to lay before the world, stating the grievances which drove them to separate from Great Britain.

The Immortal Committee.

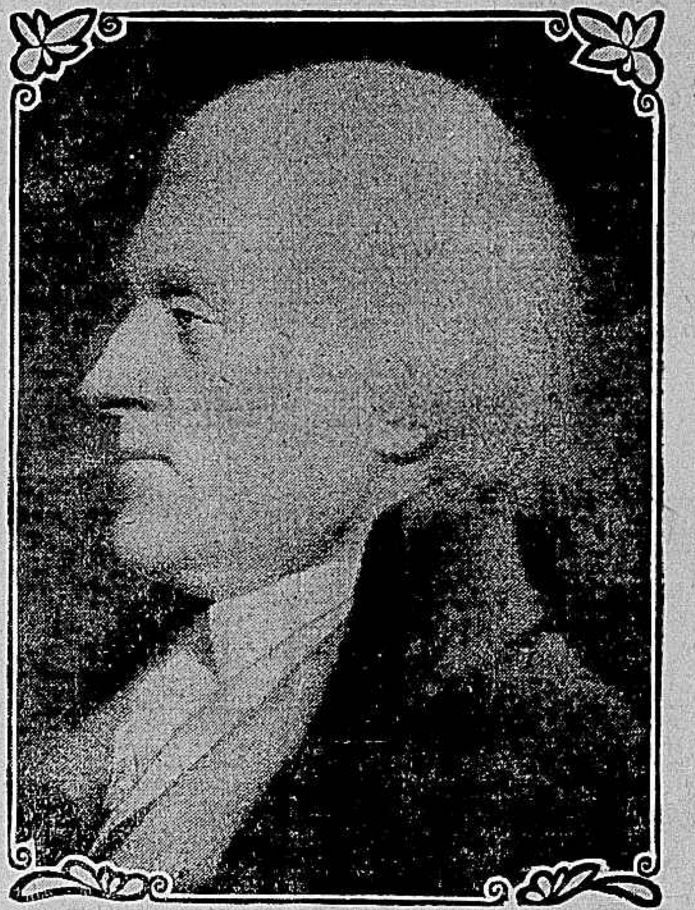
This committee was appointed by ballot on June 11 and consisted, according to the journal, of the following gentlemen: Mr. Jefferson, Mr. J. Adams, Mr. Franklin, Mr. Sherman and Mr. R. R. Livingstone.

Naturally one would expect to find at the head of this committee Mr. Lee, who had presented the resolution. That he was not given the place seems to be due to one of those nice little matters of state politics, which had quite as much influence with the "fathers" as they have today. Mr. Richard Henry Lee was not beloved by his colleagues from Virginia, and Mr. Jefferson was sent up to rival and supplant him. So says John Adams. Unquestionably state politics had something to do with the choice of Jefferson, though, as a matter of fact, Lee would have been prevented from serving even if he had been appointed, because of the illness of his wife, which called him away from Philadelphia just about this time.

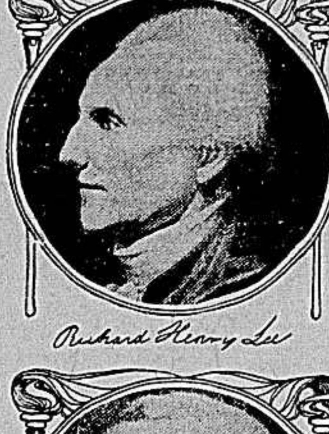

John Hancock

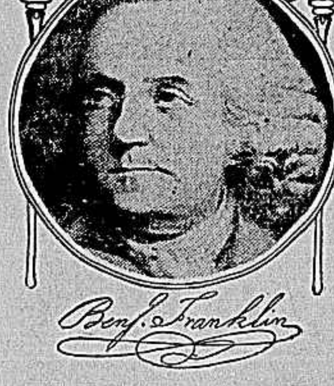

Robt Morris


Saml Adams


Th Jefferson


John Adams


Richard Henry Lee


Benj. Franklin

Jefferson was a comparatively new man in congress. He was thirty-three years of age at the time and had been a member less than a year. Even in this time he had not been at all prominent in the debates of congress. John Adams said that during the whole time he sat with him in congress he never heard him utter three sentences together. But, if silent in debate, Jefferson had shown himself "prompt, frank, explicit and decisive upon committees and in conversation" and was looked upon by all of the older members, searching for young talent, as one of the most promising young men Virginia had sent up. Particularly was he well regarded for his abilities as a writer.

On the first meeting of the committee there seems to have been a little discussion about who really should do the writing. Adams says he and Jefferson were selected by the committee, but that he insisted that Jefferson himself do it. Jefferson denies this and says that the committee pressed him alone to undertake the draft. This slight discrepancy in the memory of the two honorable gentlemen is of no importance. It was Mr. Jefferson who wrote the Declaration.

He was living at the time the task was given him in a house rather on the outskirts of Philadelphia, chosen purposely because the neighborhood was quiet. Here he had rented a second floor and was accustomed to work whenever congress was not in session. On coming up to Philadelphia on this trip one of his first tasks had been to go to a carpenter and give him a plan of a desk he wanted made—a most characteristic thing for him to do, for Jefferson was a man who insisted on planning everything which he was to use, whether a private house, a public building in Washington, his furniture or his own tomb. The desk was fourteen inches long by ten in breadth and three in height, and it was on this that through the long June days he labored on the declaration.

It must be conceded by one who reads the contemporary literature of the revolution that the gist of the document which he produced was in everybody's mouth. What Jefferson did was to voice in the favorite English style of the day the spirit of independence abroad and to state formally the different grievances of the thirteen colonies as a justification of revolution. It was a great document, because it expressed more completely than had yet been done a universal conviction and because of the genius for selection which it showed. In no sense was it an invention. Years afterward, when its fame had grown, critics of Jefferson began to sneer at the Declaration of Independence as not original and point out that this phrase and that, this complaint and that, had been uttered here or there. This controversy was hottest in 1819, when the Mecklenburg declaration, said to have been passed by Mecklenburg county, N. C., in May, 1775, was discovered.

Jefferson at once declared to Adams that he believed the document spurious and brought forth a long array of reasons to support his belief. The matter became a subject of partisan controversy. The legislature of North Carolina took it up and in 1831 published a pamphlet to prove that a declaration of independence was made in Mecklenburg county more than a year before Jefferson wrote his.

Jefferson's Labor.

So well did Jefferson do his work that when he submitted it to Adams and Franklin, before handing it over to the committee, they made only a few corrections. Jefferson then wrote out what he calls a "fair copy" and turned it over to the committee of five. They found it so good that they changed not a word of it, and on the 28th of June the document was laid before congress.

While Jefferson in his little room at the corner of Market and Seventh streets was laboring over the Declaration the country from one end to the other was busy discussing the subject. In the states where the sentiment for independence was strong—that is, in New England and the south—the exultation was great, and the colonial congresses, Sons of Liberty, committees and town meetings worked with renewed energy, the excitement penetrating to the most remote settlements. Heavy pressure was brought on the colonies which up to this time had been against separation by the discussions in newspapers and pamphlets and by the debates in assemblies, conventions, committees of safety and of inspection and in town and county meetings. The whole people soon became familiar with the question, and their councils began to feel the effect of the popular agitation. Not only were the councils at home besieged by the advocates of independence—letters, resolutions and petitions were showered on the delegates in congress. The delegates of Pennsylvania had been strictly ordered to reject any proposition for independence, but the Radical party of the colony had before this taken matters into its own hands and by an interesting revolution quite worthy of the French patriots of 1792 they succeeded in overpowering the regular assembly and forwarded a message to congress favoring independence. New Jersey, too, sent new delegates instructed for the resolution if they "thought it necessary or expedient." On June 17 William Whipple wrote back to New Hampshire that there had been a great change in the sentiment of congress since his arrival, and on June 25 Elbridge Gerry wrote to his friend James Warren, in Boston, that it appeared to him there was not even a doubt of any colony in the country excepting New York and Maryland.

As the first day of July approached the excitement in congress increased. Although we have no records of the debate, it is evident that in the intervals between reading reports from the army and voting money for gunpowder and cannon the two parties were exercising their utmost influence for and against the Declaration. The numbers for independence were gradually creeping up, and every change of front became a matter of the most dramatic interest.

The resolution was brought to vote on the first day of July, some fifty-one members being present in congress. That it would have a majority was certain, but something more than a majority was necessary everybody felt. On the morning of the 1st, just as congress was about to enter on the debate, the hearts of John Adams and his associates were made glad by the arrival of delegates from Maryland, instructed to give a unanimous vote. Matters looked so propitious that Adams wanted the vote taken at once, but New Jersey was unwilling. She had given her delegates permission to support independence if they thought it expedient; they had arrived only on the 28th, and very naturally they wanted to hear the arguments. So, to Adams' disgust, the debate began again.

Never was Adams more powerful than in this final debate on Lee's resolution. He was the "colossus of that debate," said Jefferson afterward. The entire day of July 1 was spent on the question, and at night congress was still unwilling to take a final vote and so adjourned the decision until the 2d. The night was spent in excited work. Four colonies—New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware and South Carolina—still held back, but before congress assembled the next morning a majority for the resolution had been secured in each delegation excepting that of New York [each colony had one vote in the Continental congress, a majority of the delegation of the colony deciding what that should be; New York withheld her vote entirely on the 2d], so that when the vote was finally taken twelve colonies were ready to declare that "these united colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent."

As a matter of fact, the passing of Mr. Lee's resolution effected the separation of the colonies from Great Britain, and the 2d of July is really Independence day. It was this day John Adams wrote his wife on July 3 that future generations would celebrate. "The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America," he wrote. "I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other from this time forward for evermore."

But it was on July 4 that the document which makes the formal expression of independence was adopted. That formal Declaration came before the house immediately after the adoption of Lee's resolution and was taken up clause by clause for debate. The members after their two days' struggle were not in any mood to deal easily with Mr. Jefferson's production. On the contrary, they set themselves vigorously to pull it to pieces.

With two exceptions the changes they made were verbal and to the great improvement of the document.

The free criticism of the Declaration indulged in during the debate annoyed Mr. Jefferson exceedingly. He made it a point of courtesy to reply to none of it, but it was easy to see that he took it badly. Dr. Franklin was by his side and, observing his nervousness, tried to ease the situation by telling him a story.

"I have made it a rule," said Franklin, "whenever in my power to avoid becoming the draftsman of papers to be reviewed by a public body. I took my lesson from an incident which I will relate to you. When I was a journeyman printer one of my companions, an apprentice hatter, having served out his term, was about to open shop for himself. His first concern was to have a handsome signboard with a proper inscription. He composed it in these words, 'John Thompson, Hatter, Makes and Sells Hats For Ready Money,' with a figure of a hat subjoined, but he thought he would submit it to his friends for their amendments. The first he showed it to thought the word 'hatter' tautologous, because followed by the words 'makes hats,' which showed he was a hatter. It was struck out. The next observed that the word 'makes' might as well be omitted, because his customers would not care who made the hats. If good and to their mind, they would buy, by whomever made. He struck it out. A third said he thought the words 'for ready money' were useless, as it was not the custom of the place to sell on credit. Every one who purchased expected to pay. They were parted with, and the inscription now stood, 'John Thompson Sells Hats.' 'Sells hats!' said his next friend. 'Why, nobody will expect you to give them away. What, then, is the use of that word?' It was stricken out, and 'hats' followed it, the rather as there was one painted on the board. So the inscription was reduced ultimately to 'John Thompson,' with the figure of a hat subjoined."

Franklin's story did not restore Jefferson's equanimity. In the week following the debate he made at least five drafts of the document as he wrote it and, marking carefully the changes and omissions of congress, sent them to friends.

Even time did not quite cure Jefferson of his resentment, and when he came to write his memoirs he said rather sarcastically in explanation of the two major omissions: "The pusillanimous idea that we had friends in England worth keeping terms with still haunted the minds of many. For this reason those passages which conveyed censures on the people of England were struck out lest they should give offense. The clause, too, reprobating the enslaving inhabitants of Africa was struck out in complaisance to South Carolina and Georgia, who had never attempted to restrain the importation of slaves, and who, on the contrary, still wished to continue it. Our northern brethren also, I believe, felt a little tender under those censures, for, though their people had very few slaves themselves, yet they had been pretty considerable carriers of them to others."

Just how long the debate on the Declaration continued on the Fourth is unknown. While it was going on the radicals were marshaling all their strength to secure a big vote. McKean of Delaware even sent an express at his own expense to Dover for Caesar Rodney. "I met him at the statehouse door in his boots," wrote McKean afterward. "He resided eighty miles from the city and arrived just as congress met."

It was probably late in the afternoon when, according to the journal, the vote was taken and the Declaration was "agreed to." Forty out of fifty members present are supposed to have voted for it, including one member from New York—Henry Wisner. The document was then ordered "authenticated and printed." It is improbable that there was any signing on that day, excepting that by John Hancock, the president, and Charles Thompson, the secretary. Their names were put to the copy which Mr. Jefferson had presented, but no others, as indeed would have been unwise. It was most important that the document have a unanimous approval if possible. By a little waiting and maneuvering it seemed pretty certain to the wiser members of congress that this unanimity could be secured.

Not Generally Signed on the Fourth.

Not only was there no general signing of the Declaration of Independence on the 4th of July, 1776, but tradition has invested the day with other dramatic features which unhappily are false. It is a pity not to believe, as most of us were taught, that while the debate was under way—

> There was tumult in the city,
> In the quaint old Quaker town—

a pity not to be able to tell the story of the gray haired bell ringer, sitting with one hand ready on the clapper of his bell until he hears a young voice crying: "Ring, grandpa, ring! Oh, ring for liberty!" As a matter of fact, the meetings of congress were held behind closed doors, and, while it was well known in the coffee houses of the city that Mr. Lee's resolution had been voted on favorably, and no doubt, too, that a formal declaration embodying it was under consideration, no crowds surrounded Independence hall that day. There was no small boy, no sounding of the Liberty bell.

Indeed, it was not until July 6 that the Declaration appeared in the Pennsylvania Packet. On the 8th it was read in the statehouse yard. The patriots turned out in a great crowd, and the reader, John Nixon, was cheered to the echo. After the ceremony the crowd turned its attention to the king's coat of arms, which was suspended over the doorway in the courtroom of the statehouse, tearing it down and taking it out and burning it. In many places the reading of the Declaration, which had been ordered by congress, was attended by similar acts of destruction. Thus in New York the Sons of Freedom tore down an equestrian statue of George III which stood on Bowling Green and turned the monument over to the authorities with the order to run the lead into bullets. In Baltimore "the effigy of 'our late king' was carted through the town and committed to the flames amidst the acclamation of hundreds," the records say. In Savannah in August at the reading there was a great procession, almost the whole town turning out to inter an effigy of King George III.

As a whole, the demonstrations were not noisy or destructive. The army, which might have been expected to indulge in some vindictive performances, received the news quietly, and in many cases the people seemed to feel deeply the solemnity of the step which congress had taken and to have rightly concluded that prayers were more appropriate to the occasion than the tearing down of statues. The only colony which had refused to vote for Lee's resolution on the 2d was New York. No sooner had the vote been taken than the delegates from that state sent a letter posthaste, asking what was to be their line of action thereafter. On July 9 the provincial congress of New York, which was in session at White Plains, replied that "the reasons assigned by the Continental congress for declaring the united colonies free and independent states are cogent and conclusive and that, while we lament the cruel necessity which has rendered that measure unavoidable, we approve the same and will at the risk of our lives and fortunes join with the other colonies in supporting it." Congress was now unanimous on independence.

On Aug. 2 a committee appointed on July 19 to prepare an engrossed copy of the Declaration for signing laid it before congress. Many of the men who had fought over it on the 4th of July were still present, but in the meantime many new delegates had come to Philadelphia, so that there were a number present who had had nothing to do with the original act of adoption. Just what happened at the signing we do not know any more than we know the details of the debate in the critical days when it was under consideration. One thing is certain, however. Serious as this matter of signing really was, nobody hesitated. "Give me liberty or give me death!" was no mere phrase for these men. They had weighed its grim meaning and deliberately accepted the alternative. They even took up with jests the matter of putting their names to a document which, if the colonies were defeated, would surely send them all to the gallows.

As the years went on the veneration of the people for the Declaration of Independence grew. The demand to see the document, to read its text and examine its signatures steadily increased with this feeling of reverence. The government naturally sought to satisfy this desire, but unhappily in doing so it allowed great harm to come to the original. Early in the century the ink was faded and the parchment injured in securing a facsimile for making a copperplate. Still further injury was done when it was placed on exhibition in a strong light in 1849. It remained thus exposed until some of the signatures had entirely vanished. Finally, in 1894, the state department realized that in careless good nature it was allowing the great charter to fade away. Steps were at once taken then to preserve it. It was carefully covered and placed in a drawer in a steel case specially prepared for its reception and a facsimile hung in the place it once occupied. At the same time steps were taken to preserve the original copperplate by having electrotype copies made, so that the original might be put into a fireproof safe. The document itself is thus finally protected.


Geo Read


Benj Harrison


Charles Carroll of Carrollton


Wm Whipple


Edward Rutledge


Wm Hooper


Jas Smith


Wm Williams


Fras Hopkinson


Fran.s Lewis


Thos Heyward Junr


Arthur Middleton


Button Gwinnett


Geo Clymer


Josiah Bartlett


Thos Stone


Francis Lightfoot Lee


Geo Walton


Jno Witherspoon